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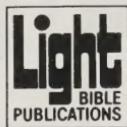
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*Editor: Colin Dryland*

The Christadelphians believe the Bible (Old and New Testaments) to be the wholly inspired and infallible Word of God. Its principal theme is the salvation of mankind through the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ and the setting up of the kingdom of God under his rulership when he returns to the earth.

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## Editorial

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**S**EVEN billion! Reports in the news media indicate that the population of the world exceeded this number on 31 October 2011. It was only 12 years ago that the population of the world reached six billion and based on current estimates, the UN predicts that it will reach 11 billion by the year 2050. Most of the population growth is in the developing world and as people live longer through advances in medicine, births in developing countries could continue to grow at the same rate or faster and the world's population could reach 15 billion by the year 2100!

This rapid population growth puts an ever growing demand on agriculture to provide sufficient food for all those hungry mouths together and fresh water to meet their needs. Another consequence of this rapid population growth is the huge increase in the numbers of people living in our already overcrowded cities. In 1950 around 33% of the world's population lived in cities but by 2050 it is estimated that 7.7 billion (70%) will live in urban areas. This will put an ever increasing strain on resources to provide the necessary infrastructure including building roads, houses, transport systems, schools, hospitals, power supplies and communications systems, apart from the massive social problems that inevitably arise from millions of people living together in large cities.

1,800 years ago, the writer Tertullian complained that the '*teeming population*' (then under 300 million) was '*burdensome to the world*'. 200 years ago, the economist Malthus predicted doom when the population reached one billion – which happened in his lifetime!

It's interesting to note that the amount of grain produced today is enough to feed 11 billion people, but it is not evenly distributed which is why millions of people are currently facing starvation in the developing world. This coupled with the continuing reduction in available water supplies makes it increasingly difficult to meet the needs of many people.

Human governments cannot solve these issues for a number of reasons which can be summed up in a phrase – '*human nature*'. Until a way is found to share the world's resources equitably so that all benefit, there will inevitably be that great divide between rich and poor, between those who have too much food and those who have little or none. As a result starvation, disease and consequently death will continue to cut short the lives of millions of people in the developing world.

However, there is an answer to these seemingly insurmountable problems and it's found in the Bible. God has promised to intervene in world affairs by sending Jesus to reign as the divinely appointed king of the whole world. The Apostle Peter said this concerning Jesus, to a crowd in that ancient city of Jerusalem, which is at the heart of the current conflict between Jews and Arabs: '*whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, of which God has spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began*' (Acts 3.21).

The result of his righteous rule is described in the Bible, and the problems that currently afflict an increasing number of people in the world including poverty, famine and disease will then be a thing of the past (see for example Psalm 72; Isaiah 11.1-9; 65.17-25; Amos 9.13-15; Micah 4.1-5). If you read the Bible and study its message with an open mind you will come to the conclusion that these '*times of restoration*' referred to by Peter is close at hand. But don't just read it – Peter also said to those who were listening to him in Jerusalem that they urgently needed to do something about it: '*Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord*' (Acts 3.19).

Editor

# The Development of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Church

## 4. Stephen – the first Christian Martyr

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WE only read about Stephen in two chapters of the Bible, Acts chapters 6 and 7, but from these we know that he was a highly respected 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christian. There are just two recorded events of Stephen's life, the first where he was chosen to administer welfare relief, and the second being his defence to the charge of blasphemy. This is sometimes called his 'apology', in which he reminds his critical Jewish hearers at length about the foundations of their religious heritage, and accuses them of hypocrisy. Both these events are very instructive for modern Christians.

The time in which Stephen lived, in the years immediately following Jesus, was characterised by rapid growth in the numbers of disciples, and by growing antagonism from Jewish believers, who adhered tenaciously to the Law of Moses. This Law was not a law devised by Moses, but a code of national and religious life ordained by God for Israel, His special people, and administered by Moses. In national affairs, it contained many practical provisions for the well-being of the people, but its religious significance was to provide a constant reminder of the inherent unstable and disobedient nature of mankind and the need for reconciliation to God.

In Old Testament times the Law required a complex system of animal sacrifices, all of which found their complete fulfilment when Jesus

Christ offered himself as a perfect sacrifice to take away the sins of mankind for ever. The majority of Jews rejected Jesus and his mission to fulfil the Law of Moses and this brought them into frequent conflict with the Christians (Romans 5. 20,21: Hebrews 7. 24-28, 10.11-14).

### **The welfare problem**

In Acts chapter six we read how the Hellenist believers began to complain that their '*widows*' were being neglected in the welfare ministrations enjoyed by the Hebrew (Jewish) believers. The term '*widows*' probably implies all those in need, not just widows in the literal sense (compare James 1.27). The reference to '*Hellenists*' is probably to Jews who had at some point been dispersed to other countries and spoke Greek, but had settled back in their homeland. We are not told what welfare was required, but we know that the early Christian church embraced very wide variations in background, culture and wealth.

The Jews already had a system for supporting the poor originating from the Law of Moses. This duty was implied in the Ten Commandments, later summarised by Jesus in the words '*You shall love your neighbour as yourself*' (Matthew 22.39). As we would expect, the duty to neighbours continued in the early Christian church, where the members were continually reminded of their responsibilities towards each other (see for example James 2.15,16). The value of this example in the book of Acts to the disciples of Christ today, is the way in which this welfare was administered and the principles involved.

It is clear that the welfare problem was recognised and dealt with quickly. It is also clear that the work of preaching the good news about Jesus Christ and the coming kingdom of God should not be set aside while this work was being undertaken. Practical and fair arrangements were made. The twelve apostles, whose primary responsibility was to continue the commission Jesus gave them to preach the Gospel, and who held the responsibility for guiding the affairs of the church, recommended the appointment of seven men, to oversee the work (Acts

6 v 3). All the men chosen, including Stephen who clearly was their leader, had Greek names. This does not imply that they were all Grecian Jews, but indicates that the community of believers, who chose them, under the guidance of the twelve, were fully aware of the sensitive nature of the problem.

Stephen in particular is mentioned as being '*full of faith and of the Holy Spirit*' (Acts 6.5,8). This is an illustration of the way in which those believers who had been endowed with gifts of the Holy Spirit used them for specific purposes in the church (I Corinthians 12.4-11). It is likely that these gifts enhanced the personal abilities and qualities already apparent in those individuals. The description of the way Stephen used his Holy Spirit gift may suggest that he made use of his own financial resources in this necessary work. This shows us that God expects us to use our abilities and opportunities in His service.

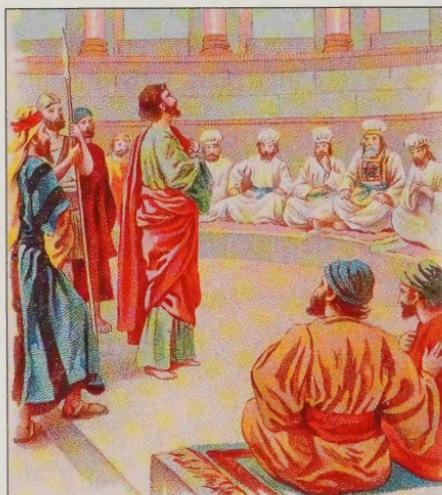
Once the seven had been appointed, the apostles prayed and laid their hands on them. This was the accepted way of endorsing the use of the Holy Spirit gifts, which were not bestowed automatically or randomly on all believers (see Acts 8.18-20; 13.3; 19.6). In this way, the church found a sound basis to deal with the problem. Whilst we make no claim to possess Holy Spirit gifts today, the process the apostles followed remains an example of how problems should be resolved practically and with sensitivity. In reviewing this episode, we also note the apostles' insistence that the preaching of the Gospel went on unaffected.

### **The charge against Stephen**

However, the implications so far as relations with the unbelieving Jews were concerned, were serious. As soon as the care of the needy had been resolved, another problem arose which was far more difficult to deal with, and demonstrates for us an aspect of human nature we may experience. The unbelieving Jews became resentful of the evident ability of Stephen, particularly the '*wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke*' (Acts 6.10). Here we begin to see a similarity between the

experiences of Stephen and the experiences of Jesus. Certain members of the synagogue took issue with Stephen, disputing with him. They brought a charge, supported by false witnesses, and stirred up the people. The charge was: *'This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us'* (Acts 6.13,14).

How typical of human nature this is. Rather than willingly accepting what God has revealed, men have so often twisted the truth against the evidence, and recruited a rabble to support them (See for example Mark 14.55-59, Mark 15.11 and Acts 21.27). Against the might of this opposition, however, the Jewish council sitting in judgment against Stephen, and *'looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel'* (Acts 6.15).



Jesus had already assured his followers that when serious challenges arose, they would be given the ability to deal with them. For example, when Jesus described the challenges the believers would face at the end of the Jewish era in AD70, and again in the corresponding end of the Gentile age which we believe we are entering, he said, *'I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist'* (Luke 21.15).

In Stephen's case, he did so with the benefit of his Holy Spirit gift. The same gift is not available to us today, but instead we do have the record of Stephen's response using that gift. We can read the same Scriptures

which Stephen drew on to make his case. The same applies to the replies that the Lord Jesus and other disciples made to their opponents (see John chapter 8 and Acts chapter 22). We therefore have a precious gift which will give us a sound foundation not only in the things we should believe, but how to live our lives genuinely and sincerely before God.

Far from intimidating Stephen, the high priest and the council of the Jews were to receive a masterly summary of Jewish history, which had been characterised by the constant love and care of God for them on the one hand, while disregarded and disobeyed by the Jews on the other. As Stephen's face shone with the glory of an angel, he brought before them the uncomfortable reality that he was in fact appearing before them in the same way that their revered law-giver Moses had done. When God spoke to Moses and gave him the law which the children of Israel were to keep, his face had shone with the glory of God (Exodus 34.29-35).

### **The message**

The charge against Stephen was: '*This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place (the temple at Jerusalem) and the law (of Moses); for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us*' (Acts 6.13,14). In answer, Stephen develops four themes: the response of their forefather Abraham to God's call; the deliverance of the children of Israel from Egypt at the exodus; the role of Moses as he led them through the wilderness; and a very brief comment on Israel's history when they eventually returned to the land they had originally left. His concentration on this early history is very important because of the significance of the events that took place. By using that approach he showed that nothing the Christians stood for contradicted what was taught in the Jewish Scriptures. There was no basis for a charge of blasphemy, in fact the reverse was true. Here are some of the key points that he emphasised:

- ❖ Abraham was told to leave his country and his family for a land which he was promised as an inheritance, but which he never possessed in his lifetime.
- ❖ The patriarchs (the sons of Jacob), '*becoming envious*', sold Joseph into Egypt, where God gave him '*favour and wisdom*' which was to lead to their relief from famine.
- ❖ Moses, who was born and brought up in Egypt, wanted to save his people and was sent by God to lead them out of Egypt and deliver God's law to them, even though they were reluctant to believe in Him.
- ❖ The children of Israel persistently worshipped idols instead of God, even after the exodus when they were in the wilderness, having failed to completely reject the false religions they had been exposed to in Egypt.
- ❖ After they eventually arrived in the 'promised land' under Joshua, David wished to build a temple for God, which was actually built by Solomon; with God reminding them that the true temple was not built 'with hands' by man but by worshipping Him.

Stephen justified his devotion to Jesus without even mentioning his name in his defence. This was a shrewd tactic. He drew his hearers to the conclusion that God's gift of His Son Jesus was the only solution for mankind's deepest need – the forgiveness of their sins. He did this by firstly drawing a parallel between Joseph and Jesus. The Jewish council listening to him would have noted this clear analysis, perhaps seeing the similarities in this light for the first time. The force of the argument would not have been lost. Just as the children of Israel (literally the sons of Jacob) had cruelly rejected Joseph until they were obliged to recognise and revere him when he saved them from famine, so the Jews would be obliged to recognise and revere their Messiah in

the person of Jesus. So far, most Jews had failed to do this. Those who did however, followed in the footsteps of Stephen.

When Stephen referred to Moses, who led the exodus, he explained how the children of Israel failed to embrace the real purpose of the law which God gave them through him. By the time of Jesus, after a subsequent reformation, observance of the law had turned into a rigid and hypocritical system of legal observances which completely missed the point of the law, and the religious leaders would not accept that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah or Saviour who God had sent in fulfilment of its ‘types and shadows’. They regarded Jesus, as they did Stephen, as a blasphemer. So Stephen pressed home his counter-attack (Acts 7. 51-53).

### A challenge

Stephen accused the Jewish council of resisting the Holy Spirit, murdering God’s Son Jesus (*‘the Just One’*) and failing to keep the Law they professed to revere (see Acts 7.51, 52). Stephen did not expect to gain sympathy, but this was certainly not a statement that was likely to endear the Christians to the Jewish leaders. However, just as Jesus had assured his followers that they would have the ability to answer their accusers, so he had encouraged them with the knowledge that God would recognise their efforts to serve Him:

‘Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you’ (Matthew 5.11,12).

The outcome was predictable but gruesome. As one man, the members of the Council rounded on Stephen, dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death. It is noteworthy that the record in Acts tells us that they *‘stopped their ears’* (Acts 7.57). They did not want to acknowledge the message Stephen gave them, which called for a

change of attitude, and required an acceptance of both Jesus and his followers. How typical this is of human nature; but also how typical of the true Christian is Stephen's reaction: '*Lord, do not charge them with this sin*'. Jesus had prayed using similar words when he was crucified.

What did Stephen mean when he said, as he lay dying: '*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit*'? Stephen was offering up his life to God, who had given it to him in the first place. Without that '*spirit*', life could not continue (Job 34.14, 15). Stephen's work was now done. He asked God to accept back the gift of life, but for him, that was not the end of the story. Although Stephen's physical remains lie in the dust, the words '*he fell asleep*' tell us that he will awake from that sleep – to be resurrected when Jesus returns to the earth. Death for people like Stephen is real, but it is temporary.

Stephen's future resurrection is a prospect that can include us as well, if we too die before Jesus returns. In Hebrews chapter 11 there is a long list of men and women of faith – including men like Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and Moses. There are many others like Stephen whose names are not mentioned, and it is clear that some have suffered severely for their faith. It includes those who were stoned, of whom Stephen was just one. The chapter concludes with a comment that embraces everyone in the category of people '*justified by faith*'. This can include you, if you accept the message that Stephen placed so fearlessly before the Jews. '*And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us*' (Hebrews 11.39,40).

Are you prepared to open your heart to the true Gospel message, to be baptised and follow the life of a disciple, so that you too can look forward to the coming kingdom of God on earth?

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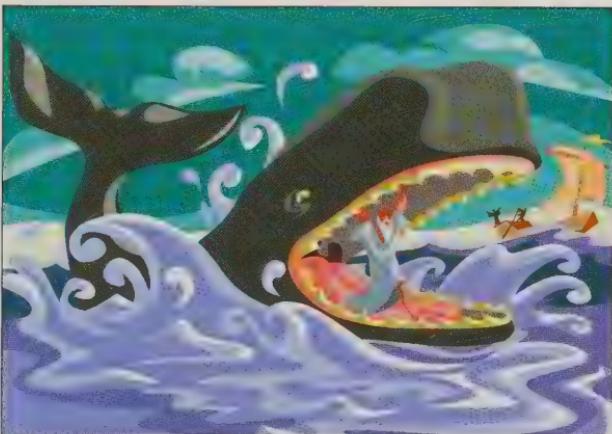
# Bible Characters

## Jonah - the reluctant prophet

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LIKE me, you may find the words of some popular songs extremely irritating where Bible stories form part of the lyrics. For example there is a 1935 New York Broadway Musical that includes a song that casts doubt on a number of Bible stories

including that of Jonah. As Bible students, we believe that the record of Jonah's life is part of God's revealed truth, and it is a record endorsed in all its detail by Jesus in the New Testament.



Yet even those who are happy to accept the truth of the account sometimes miss the point. Several times I have heard the story of Jonah being rationalised by identifying species of shark capable of swallowing men whole. Then, to support the veracity of the Scriptures, evidence is produced that tell of human bones being found inside the digestive system of such creatures. The whole basis of the book of Jonah is the importance of miraculous events. The most essential point is not that Jonah went into the fish's belly, but that he came out alive again three days later!

### The sign of Jonah

This is Matthew's account of the exchange between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders:

"Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." But he answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here'" (Matthew 12.38-41).

If Jonah didn't really spend three days and nights in the fish's belly and get vomited again alive onto the beach, then the account has no parallel with the work of Jesus. As a result, Jonah's experience would have been no sign to the men of Nineveh and correspondingly, the resurrection of Jesus would have been no sign to the disbelieving Jew, or indeed to us.

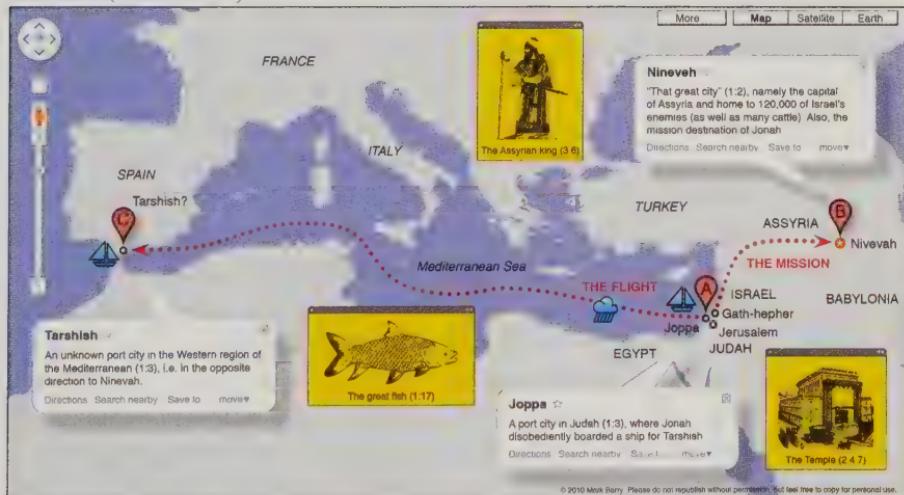
The importance of the miracle should make us stop and think. God is all-powerful, but He doesn't perform open miracles without good reason. Those reasons should give us great hope and comfort. The message of Jonah is that God was concerned about the people of Nineveh, for He sent Jonah to give them a personal message. This should encourage us, because it shows that from the very earliest times, God was concerned with Gentiles (non-Jews).

God's purpose was to be brought about through the nation of Israel, but He wanted all men to repent and come to Him. Secondly, the narrative shows us that God was concerned with sinners; God would have been entirely justified in bringing judgements upon the wicked Ninevites, just as He had before on Sodom and Gomorrah. However, God tried to

bring about a change of heart in the Ninevites by sending Jonah to speak to them. Surely we can take great comfort and assurance from the fact that if God was concerned with Nineveh, He will also be concerned with us, for we too are Gentile sinners.

### Jonah's flight

We are not told why Jonah was reluctant to see the repentance of Nineveh. Maybe he knew from the words of other prophets of God that the Assyrians would be the vehicle of Divine judgement on his own people, and so he was trying to delay the outpouring of those judgements. Maybe he didn't want his own people, who had repeatedly spurned the witness of God's prophets, to be put to shame by the repentance of an idolatrous Gentile nation. Whatever the reason, Jonah refused to co-operate with the work of God and fled: *'But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD'* (Jonah 1.3).



Map showing Jonah's journeys

Without doubt, Jonah was being tested by God. Being asked to go

alone and publicly testify against the wickedness of the most powerful nation on earth was a challenge that would try any man. Jonah was a doubter; he doubted the wisdom of the mission God had given him, he doubted if he was the man for the job and he ran away rather than asking God for wisdom, courage and strength to persevere. In fleeing, Jonah didn't find the peace he craved; rather, he found a raging tempest, for Jonah is forced to re-think his position as a result of the mighty storm that struck the ship: '*But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up*' (Jonah 1.4).

Jonah doubted the task, he doubted himself and he doubted God; so he ran away, but ended up in a worse plight! This is a powerful lesson - we won't solve our trials by running away from them. It was Jonah's big mistake, and he suffered for it. We must learn to put our confidence in God, so that with His help we can overcome the trials we are called on to endure.

### **Jonah and the great fish**

As we noted earlier, we have it on Christ's own authority that Jonah's experience in the fish was typical of his own death and resurrection. It is not difficult to see that the events leading up to that symbolic death and resurrection were also typical. The prophet Isaiah wrote: '*...the wicked are like the troubled sea...*' (Isaiah 57.20) and the sailors were on that troubled sea; they faced certain death and were powerless to save themselves, no matter how hard they might try. This is a parable of human experience, and we see that in order to be saved, they had to associate themselves with a sacrifice. Just as under the Law of Moses, the Israelite had to place his hand on the head of the sacrifice '*So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging*' (Jonah 1.15). There followed the sojourn in the fish's belly and afterwards the preaching of the Word of God to the Gentiles.

Returning to the narrative of Jonah, God had a work for the prophet to do, and so circumstances were organised to ensure that Jonah carried

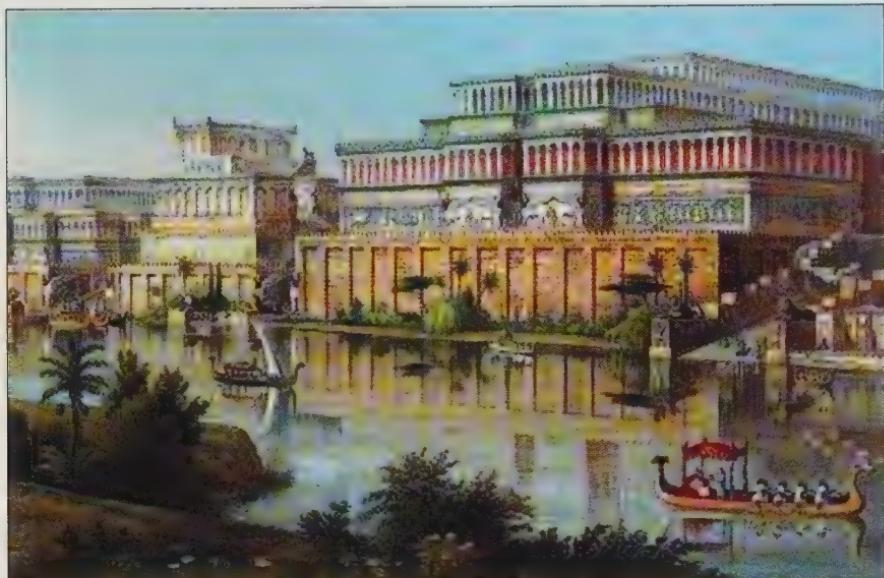
that work through. Jonah was thrown overboard and swallowed by the great fish that was miraculously provided by God. Inside the belly of the fish Jonah was forced to take stock of his situation. Jonah's reflections on his experiences are summarised in his prayer: *'Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly. And he said: "I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, and he answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice'"* (Jonah 2.1,2).

Here, Jonah declares his confidence in the fact that God answers the afflicted; but it was God that had brought the affliction on Jonah, first through the storm and then by sending the great fish. So we see that it is God who works through our afflictions to educate us and prepare us for His kingdom. Although God allows affliction, He is not indifferent to it. He hears our cries, and He answers in the way that is best for us. In this we have to demonstrate faith, for we are told that God allows affliction for our ultimate benefit.

Jonah learned from his experience and recognised that he had separated himself from God by his actions. Even more importantly, he realised that there is always a remedy: *'Then I said, "I have been cast out of your sight; yet I will look again towards your holy temple'"* (Jonah 2.4). Sin separates us from God and there is only one thing we can do about it. We can't wind back the clock and undo the mistake; neither can we do nothing, hoping that somehow God will forget about our failings. The only answer is to be like Jonah, to approach God with boldness, trusting in His willingness to forgive. Jonah goes on to say: *'...I remembered the LORD; and my prayer went up to you, into your holy temple. Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own Mercy. But I will sacrifice to you with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD'* (Jonah 2.7-9). As Jonah confesses here, if we look anywhere other than to the one true God, we are cutting ourselves off from the mercy we need. However, a full restoration needs more than an acknowledgement of God's merciful provisions. Recognition of our separated state and the power of God's

mercy require us to make changes in our own life, a change that the Bible calls ‘repentance’. Thus Jonah committed himself to fulfilling his vows.

### Jonah goes to Nineveh



*Artist's impression of the city of Nineveh*

After being vomited out on to dry land, Jonah was re-commissioned to go and preach to the Ninevites: ‘Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day’s walk. Then he cried out and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”’ (Jonah 3.1-4). And remarkably we read that ‘the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them’ (Jonah 3.5).

The words of God to the Jews through Jeremiah are relevant in contrasting the difference between God's people and the men of Nineveh in relation to the message of God's prophets: '*And the LORD has sent to you all his servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, but you have not listened nor inclined your ear to hear*' (Jeremiah 25.4). In stark contrast, only one prophet was sent to Nineveh, and yet straightaway the people listened and responded, from old to young, from artisan to nobleman. No explanation is given for this remarkable mass repentance. Perhaps Jonah being vomited on to dry land had been witnessed, and as the god of Nineveh was a fish, their repentance was because they thought the message had come from a man who had been apparently born of a great fish.

Whatever the motivation, the Ninevites wholeheartedly responded to the preaching of Jonah, and repented. They humbled themselves and most importantly of all, changed their ways following the issue of a royal decree:

'...Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish?' (Jonah 3.7-9).

### **Jonah sulks**

As we said earlier, for some unexplained but seemingly selfish reason, Jonah didn't want to see Nineveh repent. Perhaps he realised what their repentance meant for his own people, who refused to change their ways despite the graciousness of God. The repentance of the Ninevites demonstrated that the people of Israel were now the ones who deserved judgement, for they obstinately refused to heed God's message through the prophets. So Jonah was angry that Nineveh repented and went out of the city, built himself a shelter and waited to see what would happen when the forty days expired.

God provided a plant (a gourd) that sprang up to provide some shade in his exposed vantage point. Although God provided the gourd, He also arranged for a worm to damage the plant so that it withered and died. He also caused a strong east wind to blow that scorched the prophet. Jonah was angry that the gourd no longer provided him comfort and shelter, and so God had to rebuke Jonah's selfish attitude. He said: “*Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?*” And he said, “*It is right for me to be angry, even to death!*” But the LORD said, “*You have had pity on the plant for which you have not laboured, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left, and also much livestock?*” (Jonah 4.9-11).

We are not told if, or how, Jonah answered this challenge from God. The book of Jonah ends with this challenge as it were hanging in mid-air. Perhaps that literary device is there to make us think about our own attitudes. Are our priorities more to do with self-interest than the welfare of others? That is a tough challenge, but we need to face up to it, for it is the challenge that God gives to us, just as much as He did to Jonah. The other important lesson is that just as the Ninevites responded to the preaching of Jonah, we too must respond to the preaching of the one who is ‘*greater than Jonah*’.

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# The Evolution Debate – Design or Chance?

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Due mainly to the efforts of one prolific writer and broadcaster, this topic has been raised in the public consciousness in recent years. Richard Dawkins, one-time Oxford **Professor for Public Understanding of Science**, has published several books denying the existence of a Creator. His most recent is '*The Greatest Show on Earth – The Evidence for Evolution*' (Transworld Publishers 2009), in which he sets out the reasons for his beliefs. It is written in a simple, chatty style with apparently unanswerable arguments, but on probing beneath the surface there is a lot found to be wanting.

## Is Evolution a fact?

Dawkins commences by asserting that evolution is no longer a theory but an established scientific fact that is supported by most of today's scientists and religious leaders. He cites a press article jointly prepared by himself and the Bishop of Oxford that ends: '*Nowadays there is nothing to debate. Evolution is a fact and, from a Christian perspective, one of the greatest of God's works*' (*ibid* page 5). He then goes on to bemoan that a sizeable proportion of people still believe that all life is the comparatively recent work of a Creator.

This is indeed true. In recent years Gallup polls in America have consistently reported that around 44% of the US population believed that God created human beings in comparatively recent times. This proportion is similar in most other countries. One of Dawkins' reasons for writing his book, he says, was to counteract the '*lamentably strong support for this proposition*' (*ibid* pages 7,429).

This assumes that lay people cannot accept evolution, whilst the scientific community can. Not so. A Finkelstein poll link breakdown (see W A Dembski: Intelligent Design Uncensored, Page 37) showed that among medical practitioners in the US a large majority rejected Darwinism: Protestant doctors 81%; Catholic doctors 78%; Orthodox Christian doctors 72%; and Muslim doctors 86%. This shows that the belief that living things have been designed is not confined to the people that Dawkins terms the '*history deniers*' (ibid pages 7, 427-437).

Dawkins should know from his own experience that these '*history deniers*' have a point. Some years ago the Oxford Union held a 'Huxley Memorial Debate' on the motion that 'The doctrine of creation is more valid than the theory of evolution'. Opposing the motion was Richard Dawkins himself, and supporting it Professor Edgar Andrews of London University. When put to the vote the moderator said (none too clearly, and the record of the debate has been lost), that 198 opposed the motion and 150 (or maybe 115) supported it. Even taking the lower figure it shows that about one third of the Oxford Union supported the creationists' arguments.

### **Evolution by natural selection**

This is the keystone of the Darwinian theory of evolution that this book sets out to support. Proponents of natural selection say that after the emergence of the most primitive form of life, organisms developed by a random process by which small variations brought a small advantage to them in the struggle for survival, and after an almost infinite number of such random mutations over aeons of time, all life forms have developed. Crucially, living organisms have no development plan. They did not, as popular explanations suggest, 'decide' to do anything. They did not know where they were going. Evolution is a completely random process as Dawkins admits: '*Nature, of course, has no understanding or awareness of anything at all*' (ibid page 35).

The crucial question is ‘How did life start?’ It is admitted by all that the immense complexity of even the simplest living organism raises almost insuperable difficulties. So much so that even Dawkins is not able to explain the process by which life began (he does not address this at all in his book), except to suggest that it was implanted by an alien visitor, as he did in a recent film entitled ‘Expelled’ by Ben Stein!

### **Intelligent design**

An awareness of the complexity of living matter has prompted the development of another explanation of the origin of life proposed by many eminent scientists – ‘Intelligent Design’(ID). This can be defined as ‘The proposition that certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection’.

This has been prompted by what some scientists call the ‘irreducible complexity’ of living things. By this they mean that in many living structures and processes several things all have to be there at the same time if a process is to work. If only one of those is removed, the whole process stops. As a simple example, a mousetrap has several interacting pieces: the base, the catch, the spring and the arm that flies over to deliver the lethal blow—all of which must be there for the mousetrap to work. Remove any one piece and the mousetrap is useless. Intelligent design advocates assert that natural selection could not create irreducibly complex systems, because those systems only work when *all* parts are present. At the cellular level alone one could cite example after example of this.

It is significant that in his book Dawkins makes no reference to Intelligent Design or its foremost scientific advocates. The fact is that Darwinists do all they can to stifle them (as described in the film ‘Expelled’).

## Information and the origin of life

The concept of intelligent design is particularly relevant to the origin of life. Probably most people have heard of DNA, the very complex chemical chain that in a special code contains all the information needed for things to be alive. DNA is so complicated that it is extremely improbable that its basic structure arose by accident and variations in its code (mutations), resulting in the alleged natural selection, could not occur until functioning DNA was actually present. However, even if we for sake of argument allow that DNA might have occurred spontaneously at the dawn of life, we are still a long way from DNA that works. For DNA to programme the cell's activities, i.e. to make it alive, it has to have specific information superimposed on it. As Dawkins rightly says: '*The difference between life and non-life is not a matter of substance but of information*' (*ibid* page 405) and here's the problem for the evolutionist. By no stretch of imagination can anyone believe that '*information*' comes by random processes.

If you throw a handful of '*Scrabble*' letters on the floor, what are the chances of them all producing meaningful words? All the letters are there, but they have to be specifically arranged by some external intelligence to impart information. And in the cell that information must be very, very precise. The information residing in DNA causes the cell to join up chemicals called amino acids into hundreds of different large molecules called proteins. For life to be possible each protein is indispensable, is different, and has a specific function.

How does the evolutionist explain the origin of this immense and essential complexity? We find such terms as 'spontaneous generation', simple 'replicator molecules' and 'self-organisation within the cell' – terms that are meaningless jargon unless they attempt to describe *how* the infinitely complex cell processes actually arose: which they do not.

## A simulation of natural selection

In another of his books, '*The Blind Watchmaker*', Dawkins puts great store by his computer simulation to explain how life could have

originated and then evolved by natural selection. By a programme of his devising he shows that a meaningful sentence such as a Shakespeare quotation can be produced from a random supply of letters. In his book *Intelligent Design Uncensored* William Dembski, mathematician and Professor of Philosophy, evaluates this as follows (ibid pages 78, 79):

‘Richard Dawkins, perhaps the world’s most famous living defender of Darwinism … employs a computer program that appears to gradually but randomly generate a sentence from the Shakespeare play *Hamlet*: “Methinks it is like a weasel”. A six-word sentence may not seem very improbable, but grab a calculator and multiply  $26 \times 26 \times 26 \dots$  as many times as there are letters in the sentence (i.e. 23). That’s how we calculate the improbability. Everyone on the planet could dump Scrabble letters till doomsday and never randomly generate that sentence.

And yet Dawkins’ random-letter-generating computer program assembles the sentence with almost magical speed. In short order it moves from nonsense to sense. What’s going on here? Look inside the program and we find something rather curious. The program began with the Shakespearian line already in it, and any time the random letter generator created a matching letter, the computer seized it. In other words, the program knew where it wanted to go—it had been intelligently programmed to go there.

Despite Dawkins’ eloquent protestations, this isn’t how natural selection works. Natural selection doesn’t have a distant goal in mind. And it can’t evolve through generation upon generation of non-function to get to some oasis of higher function. Each generation has to be fit and functional enough to survive, reproduce and thus pass along its genetic information. The computer program obeyed no such rule. Nature may be cruel, weeding out the unfit, but Dawkins’ computer program isn’t. Most of the steps in the program’s path from twenty-three letters of gibberish to one sentence of Shakespeare were themselves

pure gibberish. They had no function at all. And yet they were allowed to survive and evolve into newer and equally non-functional strings of gibberish.'

### 'Unintelligent design'

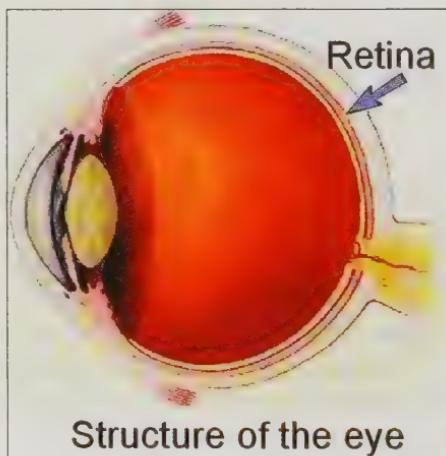
In '*The Greatest Show on Earth*' the author makes much of what he terms 'unintelligent design' and gives examples of what he believes are faulty designs in living things. In fact it is a brave man who feels so knowledgeable as to challenge the purpose of many body parts that appear unnecessary. The long list of features once thought redundant which are now known to be essential (the appendix, the thymus gland, the pineal gland etc.) should demand caution.

### Who is the 'complete idiot'?

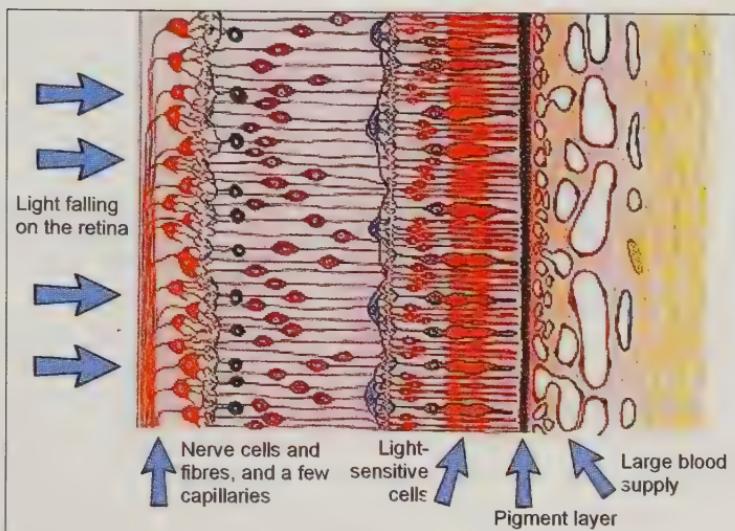
The eye has long been used by ID advocates and creationists as an example of a good design that could not have arisen accidentally. Dawkins derides its structure, saying '*It's the design of a complete idiot*' (*ibid* page 34). Why does he say this? It is, he says, because the light-sensitive cells in the retina are pointing in the wrong direction, away from the incoming light.

Thus the nerves and tiny blood vessels needed to feed the cells and take back the signals to the brain have to meander over the surface of the retina, thus obscuring the incoming light.

Yet he concedes that the eye is a '*high precision instrument*', but this is only because natural selection has somehow corrected the errors of the '*idiot*' designer! It has been said of Dawkins: '*He knows more things that aren't true than any man alive*', and his criticism of the eye tends to support this comment. The light-sensitive cells in the retina are indeed pointing away from the light, but there are many good reasons why they do.



Structure of the eye



The diagram shows a detailed section through the retina, with its photosensitive cells next to the outer rim of the eye, beneath which is a pigment layer containing 95% of the retina's blood supply. Despite Dawkins' implication, only the remaining 5% is in capillaries that form a network over the upper surface, together with slender nerve fibres. This small amount of capillaries does *not* impede the light to the sensitive areas because the brain is designed to ignore their presence. The light-sensitive cells are sited apparently the wrong way round for several very good reasons:

- ❖ First, they are the most active cells in the body and need that immense blood supply alongside the pigment layer. If this arrangement is reversed and the 95% are on top, then indeed the light passage would be severely restricted.
- ❖ Secondly, because the cells are so active they are very short-lived, and have to be replaced almost weekly. The debris from these cells has then to be removed by macrophages (eating cells). If these were on the retinal surface they would clog up the light path.

- ❖ Thirdly, the light-sensitive cells have to be the very last that the light must strike. If they were nearest to the incoming light (as in Dawkins' suggestion), that light instead of triggering a response in a single cell, would then also be dispersed into adjacent cells, and accurate vision would be impossible. However, in the allegedly wrong position, once the light has triggered a response in a cell it is immediately absorbed by the adjacent pigment layer and so cannot go on to affect nearby cells.

As ophthalmologist Dr George Marshall says: '*The idea that the eye is wired backward comes from a lack of knowledge of eye function and anatomy*' (An Eye for Creation 1996 pages 18(4): 20, 21). So much for the designer being a '*complete idiot*'!

In fact, even those evolutionists who have studied the eye in great detail admit that they do not know, and probably never will know, how the eye evolved. The world-famous ophthalmologist Sir William Stewart Duke-Elder wrote an 800 page book on the evolution of the eye in which he concluded: '*The emergence of the vertebrate eye with its inverted retina of neural origin and the elaborate dioptic mechanism... is a problem yet unsolved...There seems little likelihood of finding a pragmatic solution to the puzzle presented by its evolutionary development*' (The Eye in Evolution, 1968 page 247).

### **The giraffe's neck**

Another alleged proof of evolution and of 'unintelligent design' that Dawkins makes much of in his book is the route of the recurrent laryngeal nerve from the brain to the larynx (voice box) in the neck. In all higher animals this nerve tracks downward from the brain, round a blood vessel near the heart, before going up again to the larynx. He alleges that this is an unnecessary detour and stems from the arrangement in 'our fishy ancestors'.

He highlights this by dissecting the nerve in the neck of a giraffe, showing that by going down the neck and up again the nerve is several

metres longer than it need be, ending up almost where it started. This allegedly unnecessary route, he says, is explained by an evolutionary process that, over millions of years had gradually increased the length of the giraffe's neck.

Again, Dawkins is oversimplifying the situation. His argument might have some credibility if the nerve only supplied the larynx. In fact there are many branches off it en route that have a role in supplying parts of the heart, windpipe muscles, mucous membranes and the oesophagus, which undoubtedly explains the need for its extended route. In all Dawkins' books the evolutionary development of animals such as the giraffe is simply assumed, despite the lack of evidence. If, by natural selection, the giraffe's neck did increase in length slowly over millions and millions of years, where is the fossil sequence showing gradually longer necks in giraffes that should have been fossilised in countless numbers? They are simply not there.

We have studied these examples in some detail to show the somewhat glib and shallow approach of some evolutionists who are determined to undermine belief in a Creator and foist their views on an unsuspecting public. Incidentally, although space prevents us giving details, such critics of religion and the Bible also spend considerable time deriding what they consider to be Christian beliefs but actually are not Scriptural teaching at all.

### **Advocates of intelligent design**

Because of the failure of the Darwinian theory, many prominent scientists believe that natural phenomena can only be explained by the actions of an intelligent first cause. This is in accord with our general experience of the world around us – common sense tells us that things do not become more and more complicated by the actions of chance events. This, no doubt, is why even in this scientific age about half the world's population still believes in special creation.

One writer humorously depicts the opposing attitudes of intelligent design (ID) and evolution. ID advocates say: *'If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it probably is a duck'*.

Others, whilst admitting that nature has the appearance of design, give other explanations for this and then demand that only their explanation is true. These would say: '*If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it is without doubt a chicken*' (E. Andrews: 'Who made God? 2009, page 187)!

### An intelligent designer

Among the ID scientists there is a range of views. Some, whilst insisting that life has been intelligently designed, refuse to speculate on the designer. Others insist that such design undoubtedly indicates the activities of a Supreme Being, the God of the Bible.

Readers of '*LIGHT on a New World*' will know the stance taken by the Christadelphians. We believe that the Bible is the Word of God and its consistent message proclaims the existence of an almighty God whose wisdom and power brought everything into being. And unlike the evolutionary theory, which is cold and hopeless, the Divine plan is for a bright future for the earth and its people. Here is just one of many references to God's intentions in creation:

'For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens, who is God, who formed the earth and made it, who has established it, who did not create it in vain, who formed it to be inhabited: I am the LORD, and there is no other' (Isaiah 45.18).

The Divine intention is to create a world in which His power and His love is acknowledged by all: '*but truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD*' (Numbers 14.21). As we wait for that time we do well to listen to the advice that the Apostle Paul gave to Timothy: '*O Timothy, guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and vain babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge*' (1 Timothy 6.20).

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For a more detailed examination of evolution and the Bible, send for the booklet entitled '*Light on Creation*' (advertisement on back cover)

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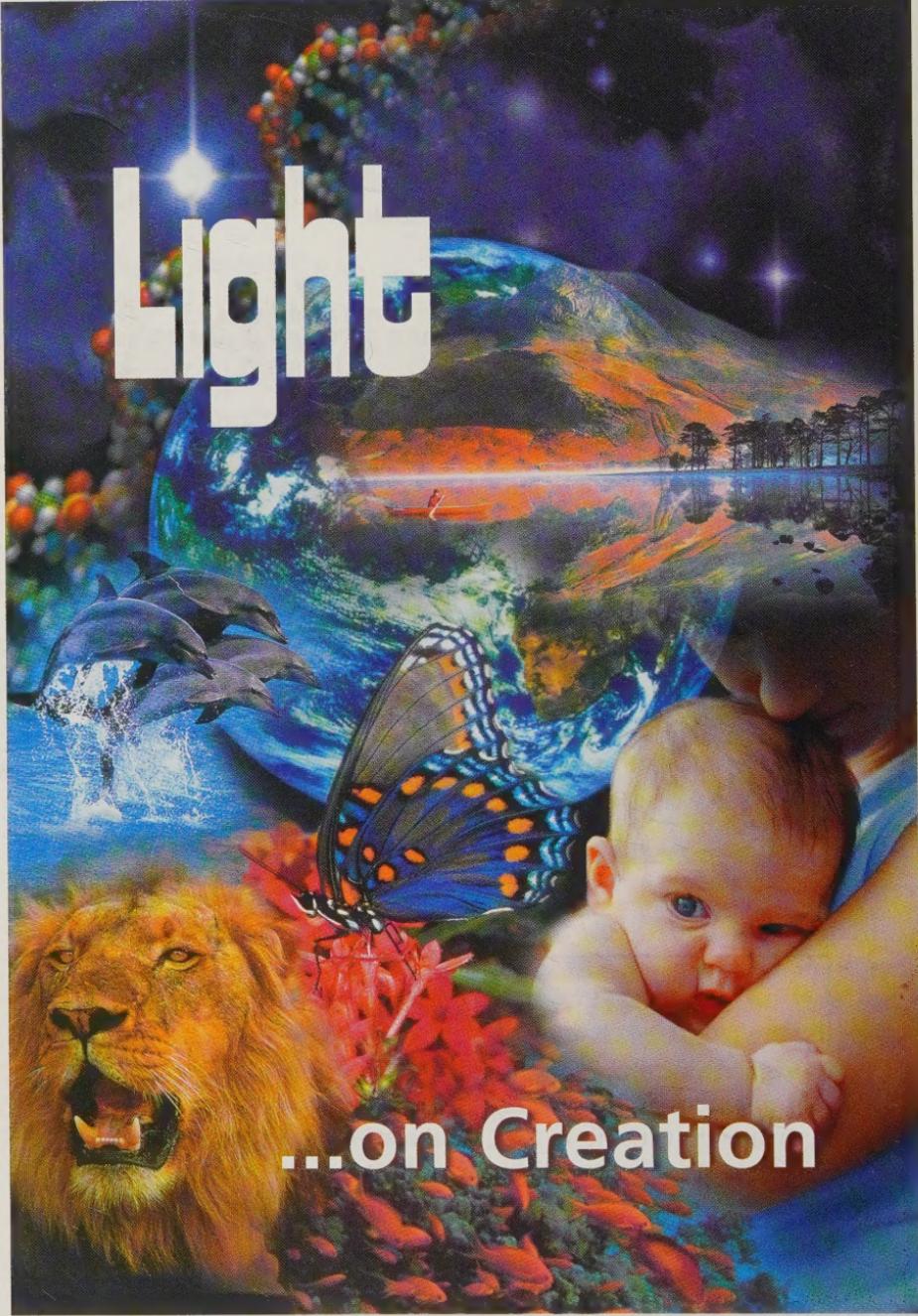
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